Martin Wong is an eternal revelation. He captured his peers, of whom he was in many ways an outsider, with grace and humanity. Rather than seeking shame and erasure in our faults, struggles, and differences, Wong found transcendence in the thing itself. Given both the vitriolic world and minds we inhabit, not to mention the harsh realities of the graffiti subculture, this was no easy task. He could capture the beauty not only in a city literally on fire, but also in our scarred and fragile souls as well. He was a painter who made prison cells levitate and brick walls drift like constellations in the night sky. Even before finding his community in the Lower East Side, Wong’s time in the remote working-class city of Eureka, CA was marked by that same capacity for empathy. It seems that no one was left unscathed by his affectionate vision. I wonder if it was precisely because he didn’t fit in that he gave so much love and attention to society’s outsiders. He was one of the rare artists who truly saw and listened to the people, places, and histories around him.

If his paintings bore witness to the scenes around him, his writings are, in a way, acts of bearing witness to himself. Self published in 1968, *Footprints, Poems, and Leaves*, is a collection of poems Wong wrote between 1966 and 1968 in San Francisco. This was long before his career as a self-taught painter in NYC, which began in 1978. Written in Wong’s signature calligraphic script, which feels prescient of historic West Coast handstyles, these poems are both early clues and an intimate glance into the depth and vision of an artist whose message is forever important, everyday more than before. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve cried seeing and thinking about his paintings. These poems are a similarly generous act, offering an inward contemplation of the artist who would later turn his gaze upon the universe of Down-town New York City. “JAN 25, MOONLIGHT THRU THE DUSTY GLASS, SHADOWS ON THE WALL, AN EMPTY ROOM, SOME SCATTERED LEAVES, + A STORY LEFT UNTOLD.”

— David Ai Wang
SANTA CRUE MOUNTAINS

Morning unfolding
cold + clean
from out of the void
earth trembling, forest
thunder shuddered redwoods
glimpse of sea
don't sniff the ground
then a rise

alone beneath a bare shade tree
trees left gathered in the forest
bark gone to play in the woods
don't hear the silence
beyond the railings
only a silence of long, bent tress
in the Corinthian
the rustling of leaves
a door slams shut
July 14

ring of dark liquid
night in the wind
rattlesnakes crawl
as the trees close

deep in the forest
not a wind, not a whisper
not a wind... stars these branches
alone beneath a redwood tree
no one comes
July 16

HAWK:
smoke from wood
back + silver
HAWK:
also burned clear
night with no fear
arrogant... alone.
DECEMBER 7: 35°8 FAST
BERKELEY

AUTUMN AFTERNOON
HOUSE SILENT OPEN LIKE A WOUND
SINKS + DOCKINGS
ALL OUT-DOORS
EVERYTHING WORTH ANYTHING
FROZEN FROM THE ROOTS
SOMETHING LEFT NOW
PUT THE MEASURES
A FEW CRUMBS FREE
SOME HUNGRY FEET

IN THE NIGHTS OVERGROWN
ONLY THE SOUND OF MOONLIGHT
FALLING ON FALLEN STONES
THE SKY HAS SHIFTED
WOLF CIGARS LATE
BEHIND MOSS COVERED WALLS
THE GARDEN WARS

GLASS SPATTERED WITH CYCLE PARTS
CATTLE + CHICKEN FEATHERS
IN SECRET ROOMS WHERE
WE PASSED THE SUMMER
POEMS PAINTED IN LAYERS
ONE ON ANOTHER
WEAVING A MIRACULOUS
COLOR NOW STREAMING OPEN AGAIN
AS THE WRECKERS DESCEND
AT THE OLD HOUSE EATURM
RAINING DOWN THIN A
SHOWER BRIEFS
SHEETS, PAPER INTO
AUTUMN LEAVES

DEC 8 1967
NEW YORK AS VEGAS
THE GLITTER, GLARE
MONEY PLAYS GAMES WITH ITSELF
NUMBERS NUMBERS NUMBERS
A COMMUTER IS HOVERING IN THE BOWELS OF A CONTAINED TIME CAPSULE HERMETICALLY SEALED SAFE WITHIN A SILENT CITY STRENGTHENED BY THE FEAR OF AN INSTANT STEEL DEATH SPUTTERING ACROSS THE UNDERGROUND ENGINE PULSATING DEEP AND TRUE. WICKED ENCOUNTERS. DEATH JOURNEYS.

A SEX GODDESS OUTLIVED BY HER SMILE, A SMILE ON TRASHED BY ITS SHADOW. SLEEPWALKERS IN BAY."SOMETHING LIES IN THE INSIDE STREETS THAT WHETHER IT IS THE INTRINSIC FLOW OF DREAMS OR THE QUIET KNOWLEDGE OF TRANQUILIZERS AND EVISION. IN A PLASTIC PARKING LOT EVERY DAY THE MAN LIES AN ARM AROUND A MELK OF A LONG ISMY ACROSS THE PASSING GLOWSTICK. IF YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO REACH THE BEAUTY, THEN IT'S SITTING THERE WITH THE DRY OUT THIS SKA TIDE END. BUT THE VISION OF THE TRASH SLUNGLERS GLITTERING BEHIND.

Martin Wong "Love Letter Incinerator - ($)," 1970. Ceramic. 10 1/4 x 7 x 11 in. / 26.4 x 17.78 x 27.94 cm.
Martin Wong "Untitled (MW Was Here April 1970)," 1970. Stoneware. 22 x 12 x 7 in. / 55.88 x 30.48 x 17.78 cm.

Martin Wong "Self portrait," c. 1970. Pencil on paper. 11 1/2 x 9 x 1/2 in. / 29.21 x 22.86 x 1.27 cm.